



Muslim Scholars on Dialogue of Modern Science: Issues and Responses

Abstract

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As we have known the rhetorical exchanges between Muslim intellectual and their Western counterparts on the relationship between Islam and modern science, has started since more than hundred years old if one takes the debate started by Ernest Renan (d. 1892) in Paris in 1883. The exchanges in the nineteenth-century between Islamic reformer Afghani and the French scholar Ernest Renan, in which they engage in a debate to qualify or disqualify Islam as being capable of producing modern science. This article will examine and highlight Muslim scholars' view on the modern science and its technology. It is found that the birth of modern science in the West and not elsewhere can be understood if we attributed its birth to the influence of four streams of science- the Arabic, Chinese, Indian, and Egyptian- entering Europe from outside.

Introduction

The call for acknowledging the birth of modern science as a result of the integration of several civilizations rather than the unique genesis of Western civilization has been made over the years by many prominent scientists, philosophers, and historians. Among those scholars one could list Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Joseph Needham, and Martin Bernal. In one way or another, they and their colleagues- including, but not limited to, postmodernists, multiculturalists, and cultural pluralist - contend that the origin of modern science as a method and body knowledge is neither a uniquely European cultural achievement nor one of which the ancient Greeks could solely boast, but, rather, those origins can be found in different ancient civilizations. Arun Bala draws upon and contributes to that argument in his eminently readable *The Dialogue of Civilizations in the Birth of Modern Science*. His intellectual debt is owed most strongly to scholars of ancient Egyptian- African, Arabian, South Asian, and Chinese culture, intellectual life, and science. On the other hand, this is probably the

first full-length monograph to cover the unique achievement of the "moderns" as the result of the dialogical integration of ancient Greece with those non- Western civilizations and their ideas. In other words, while it is true that Bala challenges the argument that the birth of moderns science is a uniquely European cultural achievement, he also challenges the complementary arguments that any other "great" civilization of the past can lay claim to those origins. Instead, he finds that Chinese, Indian, Arabian, and ancient Egyptian ideas all played an indispensable role in making possible the birth of modern science in the West. (Bala, 2006, Lotfalian, 2004).

The rise of Islamization Discourse

At the present, the debate develops to a new form of debate since the radical critique has emerged as a Muslim response to techno-scientific identities. These critiques are included secularism in the West, globalization, processes of Muslim subjectivation in the West, and the rise of Islamization discourses.

(Attas, 1993). Two of these debates that relate to techno-scientific identities are about secularism and authenticity. It is found that the ambiguous relationship between revelation and rationalization is one of the strong markers of critique of secularism by Islamists. On the response to Western secularism, the Muslim scholars criticize Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, where the author has instigated criticism from Muslim intellectual. Fukuyama argues that "historicity" has to come an "end" and that we need to live by a moral, universal ontology that is created through consensus. (Fukuyama, 1991). This implies that the Islamic recourse to the uniqueness of its own identity is entangled in history and cannot live up to the new age of universal morality. This line of argument has instigated criticism from Muslim intellectuals. Because an "end" is opposed to history is not plausible by Muslims because of the role of revelation and the eschatological structure of an "end" play in Islam. The end of prophecy is the beginning of history, and the transcendence from history, through a "return" to prophecy, or revelation, is to end the historicity and not oppose it. (Nasr, 1993).

As we have known during the second half of the twentieth century, Islam's relationship with not only science but the whole of modern knowledge along with its methodologies and premises has become the focus of a discourse which has far-reaching implications because the positions taken in this debate affect, replace or undermine the very foundations of Islamic worldview. Leif Stenberg's book is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the recent development in Islam and science debate. It is a "descriptive and analytic undertaking", written in a lucid language with remarkable clarity of thought and intent. (Leif Stenberg, 1996).

The theory of thermodynamics

The Iranian engineer and post-revolutionary Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan proposes the theory of thermodynamics. This is to find out the relationship between faith and knowledge and the role of morality in everyday life, which is an attempt to combine Western techno-science with local culture. Bazargan's usage of the theory of thermodynamics is not metaphorical. His arguments are followed by direct application of concepts and formula. What he achieves is quite creative: faith and knowledge become intertwined but disjointed....The effect of this disjointedness is that the individual becomes responsible for acting morally, as if he or she is

performing the act of god. Second, as argued by Bazargan using the theory of thermodynamics, faith is self-reflecting: it changes through time and adjust to renew changes in life. Faith also dies if there is no effort by the subject to revive it. (Bazargan, 1978)

Islamic Science and Islamization of Knowledge

In regard to the Islamic Science in Malaysia, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), founded by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is an exceptional Islamic institution in the world. The institution offers three major programs namely Islamic Thought, Islamic civilization and Islamic Science. According to al-Attas, an Islamic science does not yet exist. It is a science to come. According to al-Attas, it will happen by changing existing modern science to fit an Islamic framework. Thus there is a need for developing a methodology of Islamic science. (Attas, 1993).

We are aware of difficulties involved in drawing a clear-cut line of distinction between what is Islamic and what is not. In other words, is there an Islamic and a non Islamic science?. It should be noted that the adjective usage of the term 'Islamic' in connection with certain items, is not commonly used in early Islamic tradition. Therefore, constructions, such as Islamic medicine, Islamic science, Islamic economics, Islamic theology of knowledge were unheard of before. It has not been critically studied until S.M.N. al-Attas, put the seeds of his project named: Islamization of contemporary knowledge. (Acikgenc, 1996). The seed of his project of Islamization of knowledge began in preliminary stage through his important research on the mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri, the greatest Malay poet and Sufi who lived at the end of the 16th century. (Attas, 1986). Later, his project was widely interpreted by many Muslim scholars in various branches of contemporary knowledge. Unfortunately, those who clarified his project did not understand what he meant by Islamization of knowledge. According to S.M.N. al-Attas, Islamization, in a general sense as it occurred in history, means the: "liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition opposed to Islam, and then from secular control over his reason and his language. The man of Islam is he whose reason and language are no longer controlled by magic, mythology, animism, his own national and cultural traditions opposed to Islam and secularism. He is liberated from both the magical and the secular world views. We have defined the nature of Islamization as a liberating process. It is liberating because since man is both physical being and spirit, the liberation refers to his spirit, for man as

such is the real man to whom all conscious and significant actions ultimately refer...Islamization is a process not so much of evolution as that of devotion to original nature; man as spirit is already perfect, but man as such when actualized as physical being is subject to forgetfulness and ignorance and injustice to himself and hence is not necessarily perfect...We have also defined Islamization as involving first the Islamization of language, and this fact was demonstrated by the Holy *Qur'an* itself when it was first revealed among the Arabs.

The explanation of Islamization by S.M.N. al-Attas can be taken as a criterion of 'Islamicity'. Based on this definition, science is Islamic not just because it has been produced by Muslim scientists. Rather, it deserves the name "Islamic medicine" because it is, liberated "first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition which are opposed to Islam, and then from secular control over man's reason and man's language." (Attas, 1991).

Science is universal, value-free and cultural-free

In Pakistan, Pervez Hoodhoy wrote the book entitled "Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality." The debate around this book suggests a different specter. Hoodhoy discourse is a positivistic one: science is universal, value-free and cultural-free. Thus, Hoodhoy proposes that the prerequisite for scientific progress in the Islamic countries is to let science be science and Islam be Islam and not allow one to get in the way of the other. The children must think independently and sharpen their faculties of reasoning while de-emphasizing obedience. (Hoodhoy, 1991).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the birth of modern science in the West and not elsewhere can be understood if we attributed its birth to the influence of four streams of science- the Arabic, Chinese, Indian, and Egyptian- entering Europe from outside. Modern science could not have emerged elsewhere, particularly in the Arabic and Indian worlds, because there was no "dialogue" with Chinese technology, unlike in the West, where scientists and others received Chinese technology, without which the essential modern and scientific mechanical vision of the university would have not have emerged.

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